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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a "thick description" of a phonics lesson delivered to a first grade classroom (n=18) by the teacher. Following the description, the paper presents analyses from the following different perspectives: (1) the definition of reading; (2) curriculum from a critical point of view; (3) reading and culture; (4) teachers and activism; and (5) the children's point of view. (Contains 43 references.) (Author/NKA)

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Multiple Analyses of a First Grade Phonics Lesson

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Reading Conference, Orlando, Fl, December 1999.

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Abstract

This paper presents a thick description of a phonics lesson delivered to a first grade classroom by the teacher. Following the description, analyses are presented from different perspectives: 1) the definition of reading; 2) curriculum from a critical point of view; 3) reading and culture; 4) teachers and activism; and 5) the children's point of view.

To be literate is to have the disposition to engage appropriately with texts of different types in order to empower action, thinking, and feeling in the context of purposeful social activity. (Wells & Chang-Wells 1992, p. 147)

In this article, I first present a scenario from a classroom. Following that scenario, I offer different ways of understanding what the scenario signifies and represents for teachers and the students they are helping 'to be literate.'

Karen teaches first grade at an elementary school that is populated by predominately white children; about 60% of the children in her class receive free or reduced lunch. I include these demographics to suggest that the school is in a lower SES area of the district, though by no means the poorest. Karen and I, along with fifteen other teachers were members of study group that some teachers wanted to start together. The group met eight times during once

school year but did not continue beyond that year. Karen and I remained in contact because she worked on a masters degree at the university where I taught.

In April, one year after the study group's last meeting, the district's second grader's reading scores were published in the local newspaper. The interpretation offered to the public was that **the** scores (implying all the scores of children across all grade levels) had gone down in all but one school. Only second grade scores were published in the paper. The statistics presented and compared were of different tests (different publishers) and different editions of tests. The article did not explain that such cross-test and cross-edition comparisons were not statistically valid. Rather, a dismal picture of second grade readers was presented.

In a panic, the district adopted Open Court Phonics (19**), wanting to demonstrate to the public that the district responds quickly to dropping test scores. In district inservice sessions and via directives from principals, every kindergarten, first, second, and third grade teacher was instructed to follow the manuals verbatim

during the first year of implementation. Then, in subsequent years, teachers *might* be able to augment the scripted lessons **if** results were to the satisfaction of the district office.

Early in the new school year, many primary teachers were disenchanted with the program. In graduate courses, in super markets, and through student teachers they relayed messages to me of their dissatisfaction. It was in this milieu that I once again met Karen; I was participating in a district inservice day at her school.

"Rick," she began upon seeing me. "You would not recognize my teaching this year." I'd visited her classroom when the study group was active.

"I'm hearing that a lot this year," I answered.

"You would not believe what we have to do," she sighed.

"I'm so sorry." I didn't know what else to say.

"You've got to come and see this."

"I will," I respond.

We agree that I will observe her teaching one morning in the coming week. The following is from the notes I took

during that visit and some of my thinking as I wrote up those notes.

The Visit

I arrive in the first grade classroom as the children are completing their morning news with the student teacher in charge of the activity. The date has been decided upon and entered onto the calendar and the news from one child is being written on large chart paper. The class rereads the news together and the student teacher, having completed her portion of the morning activities, looks at Karen. Karen tells the children it is time for phonics. It is a little before 10:00. Karen's use of words is significant; "I will not call *that* reading," she told me earlier. "It's not reading." The time is important because you'll get a sense of how long it took to complete phonics on the day I visited. What follows is a typical day; Karen and the student teacher assured me that every morning consisted of this routine. The teachers guide for the program is further evidence of the routine.

Karen begins the lesson by telling the children that they will do a "you blend them story." She tells the group of 18

children, 10 girls and 8 boys, to pay attention and she begins to read the old fable of the crow and the fox. You know the story; the fox wants the cheese that the very vain crow has in its beak. The fox tells the crow that she can't sing that well; when the crow sings, to convince the fox that she can sing, she drops the cheese and the fox eats it.

But, in this classroom, on this day, the scenario is different because this is a "you blend them story." Karen begins telling the story. In the following, when I put letters in //, it indicates the sounds. When the letters are in <>, it means the name of the letter. When I refer to words that Karen writes on the board, they are underlined.

Karen begins to read, "Once there was a /k/-/r/-/ow/ [she is making the sounds which, blended together, say the word *crow*]."

Some children call out, "Crow!" Others follow suit, saying, "crow" as well, just a beat after the first bunch. The second group is taking its cues from the children who understand the task.

As Karen continues through the story, she stops at every fifth word or so and says the sounds (phonemes) that make up the word. She is reading from a scripted lesson that tells her what to say. The children can not see the story; they are listening only. Karen haltingly says the individual sounds to make these words: /f/-/o/-/x/, /l/-/u/-/n/-/ch/, /sh/-/i/-/ne/, /v/-/oi/,/ce/, /b/-/ea/-/k/, and /n/-/o/-/ne/, following the script that demands that she stretch these particular words into their separate phonemes. After the story, there is a brief discussion, but it seemed to me that only the children who said they were familiar with the fable could answer the questions. I, too, had lost the thrust of the story until I stopped to remind myself that I knew it already.

By 10:05 the story is completed. The children are asked to look at the marker board at the front of the room. Karen writes "superman" on the board. Two children call it out right away; I will learn later that they are quite precocious readers. The transition has been wordless, as the children watch their teacher shift from reading the scripted story to writing a word on the board. They are

used to the routine; it's almost October and they've been at this for six weeks.

Karen erases the <n> on superman and puts a <d> at the end to make the non-word, supermad. Perhaps you will argue that it is a word. One of the children suggests that if you are very mad at someone, you "are supermad at them." Next Karen puts an <n> back, in place of the <d>, but then places a <d> after the <n> to make supermand. Saying the whole thing very slowly, the children work to call the non-word. One calls it out and the rest echo what that child has said. They look at their teacher; "What is 'supermand'?" asks one.

Karen says, "It is not a word."

Karen erases supermand and writes baboon; one of the same two precocious readers reads it. Karen changes it to baboot. Some of the children say it; others echo it.

Next, Karen writes 'alphabet'; the two same children read it. Others echo it. Karen changes it to alphabed. Some children chuckle as they read it; others echo the word and wait for the next word. I wonder if they are curious what an alphabed is.

When Karen writes schoolbus, some say it and others echo it. Someone suggests, "Like *The Magic Schoolbus* [books]" (Cole, 19**) as Karen turns it into schoolbun. One child frowns and calls out, "Ms L, what is a 'schoolbun?'" One of the children beats Karen to the answer. He says, "Like, when you're at school, if they have hot dogs for lunch, they give it to you on a schoolbun."

The kids struggle to read recess as it is changed into reced; Karen had erased <ss> and written <d> at the end (Karen pronounced this as by saying the prefix 're' with the word 'said'). Then they shift to the next part of the lesson.

It's 10:05. Karen announces, "Let's get out Sniggle." Sniggle* is the puppet that the students have named. "Figure out what Sniggle is doing today," Karen says. She holds the puppet facing her; she says, "Maze." She moves the puppets lips and changes her voice and says /zzzz/. She says man,

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* Karen is, like many teachers, afraid that if her identity is not concealed that she will be punished for allowing me access to her teaching. Because of that, her name, the location of the school, and even the puppet's name have been omitted or changed.

the puppet says /nnnn/. She says fish, the puppet says /shhhh/.

A child suggests that the puppet is saying the ending sound; Karen confirms this and the children say the ending sound for these words, along with Sniggle: sleep, touch, leak, meet, truck, treat, place, eat, please, teach.

Karen says, "Thank you for helping us," to Sniggle and places him back in his box near her desk.

At 10:12 Karen asks the student teacher to put the overhead projector in place. Karen holds up a card that measures about 12 by 18 inches with upper and lower case <d> on it.

She says, "The upper case <D> is a straight line down from the sky and a big fat tummy. The lower case <d> is a circle and then a straight line down." She says this twice, drawing the letters in the air with her index finger.

I look above the markerboard at the front of the room, where one might typically see the alphabet in a first grade classroom. There is a row of 26 white cards the size of the one Karen is holding. Six of them have an upper and lower

case letter (e.g. Dd) and an illustration. One of the cards is the letter <a>. The rest of the cards are blank.

Karen turns over the card she is holding to reveal the letters <d> and <D> again; this side of the card also has a picture of a dinosaur. Some of the children seem excited and talk to Karen and each other about dinosaurs. It's 10:14, and I look around at the group of first graders. Some are watching Karen, others are not. One child has carefully rolled up one leg of his jeans and works at unraveling his sock. He is making a little ball with the string of elastic as he unweaves. A few of the children are rocking back and forth, not paying particular attention to Karen. One child is quietly making the sounds of bombs dropping ("eeeeyowwwwwww plichhhh"). One of the children picks his nose; another plays with her ears; one more is rubbing her hands up and down her braids (later she'll undo and redo them). When I first started teaching, we were taught to monitor frustration behaviors. I am seeing many such behaviors now.

The student teacher has the overhead machine in place and turns it on to reveal a story about a dinosaur. Karen reads

it as the student teacher points to each word. The story has a lot of <d>'s in it. At the end of every few lines is two-letter <d>'s written side by side (<dd>). The children are to say the sound /d/ when they come to the parts of the story where <dd> is written.

The story is short and the children focus back on Karen as the overhead is turned off. It took only two minutes to read it. There was no discussion of the storyline.

I notice that the letter <h>, above the markerboard, is one of the letters that can be seen; it has a picture of a dog under it. I whisper to the child next to me, "What is that picture on the card with <h> and a dog?"

She smiles and says, "That's a /h/ /h/ /h/ hound dog."

I smile back. She has breathed big puffs of air with each /h/ and we both think she's quite clever.

Karen reads from the scripted teachers guide, "Say these words back to me if they start with /d/ /d/," she says the sound of <d> twice. Then she reads: dog, daisy, dance, foot, dark, wagon, doorman, paper, and the list goes on for about 12 words. There are three categories of children's responding during this activity. The first category, the

'random responders,' is the children who call back either random words or every word regardless of the word Karen calls. The second category, the 'we get it gang,' is the children who understand the demands of the activity and only call back those that have an initial /d/. The third category, which I refer to as 'procedural observer participants' (after Bloome's [19**] notion of procedural display) call back only those with an initial /d/, but do so only after waiting for and echoing the 'we get it gang's' response (or lack of response if there is no /d/ at the beginning of the word Karen calls).

At 10:19, Karen says, "You all seem very restless because of all this phonics." It is here that something quite remarkable occurs. I expect she will tell them that they'll go outside for a break; but instead she says, "I've got a real book about dinosaurs here." She holds up a large picture book that has a big dinosaur on the cover. The scripted lesson has been placed aside. As Karen reads and shows them the pictures, the frustration behaviors that I noted abate. The sock unweaver, who is one of the precocious readers, moves closer to Karen and looks at the

book as its read. The nose pickers stop picking their noses. The rocking that some of the children were engaged in stops during the reading of the story. The child who played with his ears and the kids who were chatting with their friends instead of watching Sniggle or saying non-words are now focused. As she reads, Karen is emotional and active and changes her voice for different characters.

I explain the changes in the classroom during the reading of the dinosaur book by relying upon Halliday and Hasan's (1989) ideas of field, tenor, and mode. The shift in the nature of the text (Halliday's mode) being used has changed the children's behavior, their relationship with their teacher, and their relationships with each other. Halliday refers to the nature of the relationships as the tenor. It was the shift in text that influenced a shift in the tenor of relationships in the classroom. I suggest further that school has become a substantively different place (with different behaviors exhibited and different ways of talking considered acceptable) during the reading of the dinosaur book. Thus, there is a change in the field (the institutional setting) when the dinosaur book is read. The

large colorful pictures, the elements of a real story, and the connections that children are encouraged to make during the discussion of the book have changed the classroom context. Indeed, using con-text, hyphenated as Halliday does, suggests that there are always relationships and settings (tenors and fields) that accompany a text.

It's 10:33. They discuss the story, including the genre. Karen excuses the children to write in their journals for 15 minutes. She tells them that phonics is not done; they'll have to return for more in a little bit. She tells them that she wants them to "enjoy writing for a while" (her words) before they continue. The children chat as they return to their desks, find their journals, and write. They share their writing with each other and with Karen. Twenty minutes after they were excused, she calls them back to the marker board area. "Let's finish phonics."

It's almost 11:00.

The children are asked to say the words as Karen changes dad to had to mad; an to and to hand; ant to can to cat to can to can't.

Once again, as I look around the group of children sitting closely together on the rug, I see: a child picking her nose and examining the findings; one child poking (in a friendly manner) another; one pulling at the rug; the sock child is, once again, tearing apart his clothing; one child talks to a friend; one sits and rocks and twists his ears; one unbraids and braids her hair; one sucks his bracelet; one is squatting, rather than sitting on her bottom; one is rolling; and one is styling her cuticles with her thumbnail. Without looking up, some answer mechanically, some echo, others ignore as Karen asks them to say what she writes.

Karen moves from one scripted activity to the next. At 11:10 she has the children pick up letter cards with: <m>, <n>, <c>, <d>, and <a> on cards; these are some of the same letters that are displayed above the marker board at the front of the room. The <a> is printed in red; the rest are black. On one side, the cards look like a conventional deck of playing cards; the letters are on the other side. The children know this routine and immediately start to make words and call them out.

They make mad and discuss the sounds of each letter in mad. One makes dam and is accused of making a bad word, but Karen clarifies that this is a thing that holds water back, not the bad word. One says he could make candy if he had a <y>. Karen says, "That is harder than we're supposed to make." This is the only time in the lesson that she looks over the children at me. Her eyes fill with water. Later, she will explain that the program underestimates some children and confuses others. "It's just not for every child," she sighs.

The closing part of the lesson, beginning at almost 11:20, involves the distribution of a "book" made from a blackline master. The book is one piece of photocopy paper, with each page being one-fourth of the piece of paper. The book is illustrated; entire text is:

(Title:) The Cat

(Page 1:)The cat had a nap on a mat.

(Page 2:) The cat had a nap on a pad.

(Page 3:) The cat had a nap in a pan.

(Page 4:) The cat had a nap in the cap!

Each page has a blackline illustration that shows a man angry about where a cat sleeps (on the welcome mat, on the mouse pad at the computer, and in the pan he wants to cook with; he leaves the house with his hat as the cat sleeps in his cap). The kids read the text in a mass oral reading; some read, some echo, some ignore. This is followed by a flurry of rereading to a few neighbors. They briefly discuss the naughty cat in the book. Karen says they may color it later on.

Karen asks the children to put the book in their book bag, a large freezer storage bag that has other books that they can read. Some are reading rather complex pieces; others have more predictable (not just phonetically regular) books like Brown Bear, Brown Bear (Martin, Jr., 19**). They've had four other books like The Cat and Karen has a book of blackline masters filled with many more to run off for the kids to read during the year.

Each day, Karen is required to do one lesson of this direct, systematic, intense phonics program. When the children are dismissed for lunch, Karen tells me that when she told a district reading consultant that phonics was

taking up to 90 minutes on some days, she was told that she has a "personal problem". She makes little quote signs in the air when she says *personal problems*. "What does that mean?" she asks looking at me.

"I don't know." I tell her.

I have no idea.

The total time spent on phonics, subtracting the minutes that the children heard a real book and wrote in the journals, was 60 minutes.

Classroom activity is representational; by that, I mean that the things that occur within a classroom signify many things. One might consider the hour I spent in Karen's classroom as a metaphor for life in schools in a time when phonics is driving many reading programs. The time also suggests a definition of reading. Or, you might view the activity from a perspective that suggests that teachers are typically a conduit for curriculum that is manufactured far from the site of the school. Perhaps you found my writing slanted or jaded in that my ideology of the teaching and learning of reading comes through too strongly; you might

argue that, as a writer and researcher, I should have been more objective. In the following sections I present some of the many ways of understanding and interpreting the scenario described above. I put the theme of the following up front; consistent with Alfie Kohn (19**), I believe that our children desserve better than the minimalist program they're living through. Karen feels the same way.

What is Reading?

One interpretation of the phonics lesson is that it represents a view of reading. It is not Karen's view; recall that she was upset about the program being mandated and the time it took away from "real reading." She called the activity 'phonics' and would not refer to the time as *reading*. Rather than view the activity as Karen's definition of reading, it would be more appropriate to say that the district's view of reading is heavily based in direct systematic intense phonics instruction for all children. This definition is operationally defined. Reading, in the reality of the classroom, is defined by what happens (by what operates or occurs) and by the amount

of time teachers do certain things. Since teachers received the phonics mandate, Karen's students did not share big books, read independently books at their own levels, receive individual and small group instruction, and work on inquiry projects as much as they did formerly. There was no time.

Willis (1997**) suggests that we examine how "changes in the definitions and purposes of literacy…have evolved in response to changes in the history of the United States" (p. 387). Karen is following the district's reading curriculum, which the district says follows some of the recent publications on reading (the district office cites Adams [1994] and Snow, Burns & Griffin [1998]) as well as what the public wants (as published in the local newspaper). The change in the *definitions and purposes* of reading is a shift from the definition offered at the beginning of this article. It is a shift from the trusting of teachers as professional decision-makers about those very definitions and purposes to demanding compliance from teachers and their students.

Cunningham and Fitzgerald (1996) urge us to understand such changes as being more profound than views of reading. They suggest that, "Knowing different epistemological issues and positions forces us collectively to examine the *world views* implicit in reading organizations, journals, research methods, accepted or popular practices and so on…" (p. 36, emphasis added).

The world view in this district is imposed in a top-down manner and dressed up and presented to teachers and the public under the banner of 'balance.' Karen's knowledge of reading research is quite sound. She earned a masters degree, attends national and international reading conferences, is well read in reading journals, and is reflective about her practice. She also feels vulnerable about her job and was told that being insubordinate (not following the phonics curriculum as written) is grounds for being fired. In this district view of reading, Karen's knowledge is systematically discounted. The shift in the definition, the answer to the question *'What is reading?'* is a shift in the view of the teacher and the child.

"I was told," Karen recounts, after her students leave for lunch, "by the district reading person that for too long teachers in this district have been thinking that their job is to create curriculum. I was told that is not our job. Our job is to 'deliver' [she makes quote signs in the air with her fingers] curriculum."

"I was also told," she continues," that teachers in this district have acted as though they are self-employed and that they are not self-employed and they need to stop acting as though they are."

"What does that mean?" I ask her.

"It means," Karen's eyes once again fill with tears, "that we are not allowed to think for ourselves or make decisions."

It means that Karen's understanding of reading is dismissed and that in this district there is one definition of reading reflected in a single view of reading instruction. The district is so committed to this view of reading instruction that no children are allowed to leave the classroom during this time. The ESL, Reading Recovery, special needs, and gifted students all stay for phonics;

thus, they are often pulled out when the remnants of Karen's holistic program are enacted. Five or more of her students often leave for other support when she has time for big books and other activities mentioned earlier.

"I wonder what the justification is for having the kids stay and all sit through the same lesson…" I ask.

Before I finish the sentence, Karen shakes her head. "I didn't believe this! We were at a district inservice about this program and someone asked that very question. The company representative said, 'Trust me. This program is good for every child in your class'"

"The last time someone said 'trust me,'" I say, "I wound up buying a Chevy Nova."

We both half-laugh. The district office demanded that all teachers would follow the scripted phonics program for the full year; district administrators would decide at the end of the year just ***how*** (not ***if***) teachers would use it in subsequent years. Since test scores went up at the end of the year, it was decided to use the program as written for another year.

Karen's frustration is *informed* frustration. She is not frustrated because of vague feelings she has. She is informed about research on teaching, learning, curriculum, and the reading process. Her frustration lies in being informed but **not** being able to make informed decisions about her teaching because the of the dogmatic nature of the prescribed curriculum. She is not able to make informed decisions that would benefit her student's learning. It is not that she doesn't *like* phonics. Rather, her frustration is rooted in the knowledge that her professional decision-making is appropriated. She can no longer decide which strategies to use to address learning needs she identifies, not in this one size fits all curriculum.

Karen's definition of reading has been appropriated by her district and administrators at her school through the decisions they made. Karen can still think, cry, and discuss; she feels she can not change what must be covered in her classroom. Her decision-making has been overshadowed, her thinking marginalized, and her professionalism confiscated. This goes beyond epistemological discussions of what reading is, how

children learn to read, and how it is we come to know what we know about reading. It moves to the nature of curriculum and who controls curriculum.

Curriculum

Curriculum is more than a set of materials. Curriculum, in Karen's case, signifies many decisions that were made. Karen was not included in those decisions but she must live with them, a view made clear to her by her administrators in the school and district.

Dewey (1938) discusses curriculum as something that needs to develop locally, even as locally as the classroom, so that teachers and students have input:

> The plan, in other words, is a cooperative enterprise, not a dictation. Karen's suggestion is not a mold for a cast-iron result but is a starting point to be developed into a plan through contributions from the experience of all engaged in the learning process . . .. The essential point is that the purpose grows and takes shape through the process of social intelligence. (p. 72)

This view of curriculum is not available to Karen or her students. They were subjected to curriculum that was put in place in response to a manufactured outcry (Berliner and Biddle, 1995) at the national, state, and local levels. Dewey (1904) was well aware of curriculum rooted in reaction rather than thoughtfulness—almost one hundred years ago:

> The tendency of educational development to proceed by reaction from one thing to another, to adopt for one year, or for a term of seven years, this or that new study or method of teaching, and then as abruptly to swing over to some new education gospel, is a result which would be impossible if teachers were adequately moved by their own independent intelligence. The willingness of teachers, especially of those occupying administrative positions, to become submerged in the routine detail of their callings, to expend the bulk of their energy upon forms and rules and regulations, and reports and percentages, is another evidence of the absence of intellectual vitality. (John Dewey, 1904, NSSSE Yearbook)

Perrone's (1991) view of curriculum resonates with Dewey's; they both argue that educative curriculum originates as collective efforts, passions, and interests of all those involved. Curriculum development can be mind-ful and wonder-ful (Duckworth, 19**) and an ongoing process that is demanding and lifechanging (Meier, 1995) for teachers and students (Author, 199?**). Curriculum, when viewed *as what it is that transpires in a classroom*, has the potential of being the ultimate expression of a teacher's professionalism and an ultimate learning opportunity for the children. Others assuming power over that expression, silencing Karen and the children for the sake of standardization, are expressing not only a view of curriculum, but also a view of teachers and children. Specifically, they view curriculum as something that can be standardized; they view teachers as technicians who deliver curriculum. They view children as raw dough, rolled out, and curriculum as the cookie cutter that will make them all the same. As Perrone (1998) says, "By and large, this standards movement is more about standardization than

standards, and it tends in most cases to look right past the students teachers meet day in and day out in their classrooms" (p. 41).

The standardized view of curriculum, teachers, and learners (Ohanian, 1999) is oppressive because it minimizes teachers' professional decision making and dismisses children's input. Karen needs to be able to use her professional discretion to decide which children need the phonics program. The appropriation of such decision-making by a phonics program publisher and local administrators brings home the idea that curriculum is political activity. It is political because it involves, among other things, power and position.

Reading and Politics

Most teachers do not like to think of themselves as being in a political profession and they do not like to think about teaching as a political act. Teaching is a political act (see Freire, 1970). Historically, elementary school teachers have been women and they have been controlled by 'others' (Shannon, 1990). The systematic silencing of women

is well-documented (Belenkey, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986); such silencing in schools exists for teachers and for students (Fine, 1987). Women become aware of the political nature of teaching when they engage in conversations about their teaching lives and their positions in the field (Hollingsworth, 1994). Karen is forced into a position of submission to a curriculum that is contrary to her worldview of teaching and learning. She is forced in that she must choose to either leave her job, be fired, or submit.

For the past three years, the annual WLU conference offered preconvention workshops on teaching and politics. Colleges and universities are offering increased numbers of courses on reading, writing, and politics. And many researchers are writing pieces that are critical of the way things are happening in reading research and reading curriculum. Taylor's (1998) critique of research which supposedly supports intensive phonics instruction is a long volume that deconstructs the statistics and methodology that is being used to support phonics programs. Krashen (1999) argues that intensive phonics programs limit, more

than help, students' acquisition of reading. McQuillan (1998), Spring (1997), and Berliner and Biddle (1995) offer more evidence that suggests that the literacy crisis is manufactured for the benefit of perpetuating certain business and political interests.

Why would industry and politicians invest so much in perpetuating districts' use of phonics programs? This is the part of what is occurring presently in education that teachers do not like to hear. Perhaps I will seem too much like a conspiracy theorist; I am not. It does seem that many conservative politicians and many businesses are working to silence teachers and to deprofessionalize teaching.

Progressive and holistic philosophies of teaching and learning have been critiqued and attacked for years; John Dewey (19**) experienced this long ago and progressive educators have felt attacked since (Shannon, 1990). One issue at hand is compliance. Systematic intensive boxed programs demand teacher and student compliance. Yet, industry seems to be constantly calling for workers that can think. That is true; but they only want a small number

of those workers to be thoughtful (Ohanian, 1999). Gee, Hull, and Lankshear (1996) describe it this way:

> We are heading towards a world in which a small number of countries and a small number of people within them will benefit substantively from the new capitalism, while a large number of others will be progressively worse off and exploited. (p. 44)

In other words, the new capitalism that we are facing is one in which large numbers of people must not be thoughtful and must be compliant. Karen and her students are learning to be compliant.

Karen was not free to make important pedagogical decisions informed by her knowledge of her students. Under the guise of scientific studies, her district office was holding up weak and confounded research and bullying her into conforming. She was forced to use a certain program, at a certain time, with all of her students. She was not allowed to decide who needed intensive phonics and who did not.

Reading and Culture

The program that Karen was being forced to use provided only superficial representation of individuals from diverse groups. Karen was not allowed to engage in culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994) because she was not afforded the opportunity to develop lessons that reflected the specificity of cultures and ethnicities in her classroom and the broader community. Karen's and the children's cultures were marginalized from school experiences during the entire phonics lesson. The rest of the day is not exclusive in this way, yet the use of significant classroom time in disenfranchising children sends the message that reading (or phonics, as Karen would label it) exists in a realm that factors out differences. That's just not possible.

Heath (19**) has shown how children from the dominant culture succeed in school because of the strong ties between the nature of school and the nature of home. When this is perpetuated, reading becomes available to fewer children from diverse groups. In spite of the claims of many phonics programs, research on those programs suggests

that dominant culture children meet with success while others do not (Taylor, 19**; Krashen, 1999 Bi/l bk). I would not suggest that the programs are intentionally biased; operationally, the programs favor dominant culture success. I don't know why. We need to study that more. But since it is happening, it is something that merits response.

Dewey suggests that:

> If teachers were possessed by the spirit of an abiding student of education, this spirit would find some way of breaking through the mesh and coil of circumstance and would find expression for itself. (John Dewey, 1904, NSSSE Yearbook)

The *expression* of *spirit* leads to the idea of teachers as activists. Yet, if it is difficult for teachers to face the political nature of the profession, how will we be moved to action?

Teachers and Activism

To reiterate, I do not want one program for all children. I want teachers to be able to decide what their students

need. I want them to engage in professional teaching and not serve as conduits for prescribed curriculum. It is with the goal of teacher as decision-maker that I suggest teaches engage in activism.

The NCTE recently published (available first at their annual convention in Nashville, November, 1998) a strategy packet for teachers interested in writing to various commissions, legislators, and more. The packet includes addresses, e-mail addresses, and phone numbers of congresspeople. It also lists various committees that their legislators serve on and sample letters to write to those individuals.

Karen Smith, the NCTE person responsible for bringing the packet together, also included "Fact Sheets" which are one or two page responses to reading and writing issues in language that could inform the public. Fact Sheets topics included: spelling, beginning reading, bilingual programs, and more. There were ten fact sheets in the packet and more are being written. Teachers are encouraged to duplicate the fact sheets as part of informing the public about what should happen in schools. We need to engage in public

relations at the local level so that families of our students will respond to the criticisms of our teaching. Weaver's (19**) book is a rich collection of overheads that help the general public understand how children learn to read.

One of the most powerful activities in which teachers can engage is meeting with each other. The purposeful and systematic overcoming of the cellular and isolated nature of teaching (Lortie, 1975) is a powerful tool of activism. Teachers' lives include significant interaction with children; rarely are they encouraged to meet and discuss with other teachers. Inservice days are typically tightly planned to meet district agendas. It's time to meet and engage in discussions. We need to tell our stories to understand what is happening to us. This reminds me of the beginning of the film *A River Runs Through It:*

> Long ago, when I was a young man, my father said to me, "Norman, you like to write stories?"
>
> And I said, "Yes, I do."

> Then he said, "Some day, when you're ready, you might tell the story of our family. Only then will you understand what happened and why."
> (Columbia Tri-Star Pictures, 1992)

Susan Ohanian (1999) puts it quite eloquently:

> …we teachers can resist the …imperative that would turn us into train conductors, programmed to keep our students operating on an ideal schedule devised by a complicity of politicians and bureaucrats. As teachers, we must resist much. We must also tell [our] stories. We must tell them often, and we must tell them loudly. (p. 24)

It was systematic meetings, the opening of forums in which stories could be told and issues could be discussed, that led to the civil rights movement in the 1960s and the union movements of the 1920s and 1930s (Horton, with Kohl & Kohl, 1998). Union movements were involved in changing the lives of child laborers, miners and others whose lives were endangered at their jobs daily. The civil rights movement led to desegregation and other civil rights legislation and adjudication. Maxine Greene (1995) calls for a return to the zeal that was felt during the 1960's:

> …it may be the recovery of imagination that lessens the social paralysis we see around us and restores the sense that something can be done in the name of what is decent and humane. (p. 34)
>
> We need …to recapture some of the experiences of coming together that occurred in the peace movement and the civil rights movement. We need to articulate what it signifies for some of us to support people with AIDS, to feed and house homeless persons in some dignified way, to offer day-long support to the very young in store-front schools, to bring into being teacher communities in our working spaces. (p. 197)

It is time for us to talk to each other. It is time because talking to each other gives us access to "the inner ground from which good teaching comes and to the community of fellow teachers from whom we can learn more about ourselves and our craft" (Palmer, 19**, p. XX). Action might or might not originate in the forums of graduate courses, education association meetings, or other places that seem to generate one-time discussion but little

activity. It is time for us to use our imaginations, as Maxine Greene suggests, to imagine schools and classrooms in which professional teachers are encouraged to use their knowledge of pedagogy and literacy to support children's learning. Our classrooms need to be language exploratoriums in which local languages, knowledges, and interests are the basis for teaching. It is time for teachers to reappropriate (or appropriate for the first time) reading curriculum, thus engaging in the political activities of teaching and curriculum co-construction, with their students, families, and the communities in which they work. Vito Perrone has a sense for what might happen as teachers become activists who advocate for their students and the profession:

> . . .if we saw the development of active inquirers as a major goal [of schools], much that now exits—workbooks and textbooks, predetermined curriculum, reductionism, teaching to tests—would, I believe, begin to fade. (Perrone, 1991, p. 9)

And what would flourish and bloom in their place would be relevant and educative teaching and learning experiences at the hands of professional teachers.

The Children

Most of the discussion, above, focuses on the teacher's changing role in an oppressive situation. What about the children? Dressman (1999) offers that

> …in the 1990s what appears to be indisputably objective *scientific* knowledge about early literacy to some appears to others to be a set of discrete facts that have been broadly interpreted to produce policies and literacy curriculums that are as much the product of their makers' cultural politics and normative assumptions about social reality as they are the product of a dispassionate use of the scientific method. (p. 258)

Thus, under the guise of science, students are objectified into a common pool in which they all must learn to swim at the same pace, with identical instruction, and (in the program that Karen uses) with little systematic ongoing

evaluation of their progress. They merely move from lesson to lesson in a daily (minimum one hour) program.

Peter Johnston's (19**) recent call for a consideration of the consequential validity of testing can be extended to the call for blanket phonics programs that deny teacher decision-making. Simply asked, what happens to children when they are in a program like the one in Karen's room? Children typically learn to comply or face the consequences (Taylor, lrng dnd, 19**?). They are subjected to curriculum when it is delivered in colorful and neatly organized packages. But 'balance' as operationalized by this district is merely a political balancing act in which certain influential parties are appeased. Real balance is an individual, linguistic, psychological, social, cultural and spiritual affair. It is organic and a responsive process headed with a professional decision-maker.

Karen's students have little time to read and write. Their access to books, other texts, and so much of what we know children need to learn to read (Holdaway, 197**; Cambourne, 19**) is severely restricted and controlled. The one size fits few (Ohanian, 19**) of curriculum limits the

students' growth. The first grade studies (Bond & Dykstra, 19**) showed how little time 'average' students actually read in tightly controlled programs. And, struggling readers' access to texts is even more restricted. Now, with programs such as the one Karen is using, children receive confusing messages about what reading is. Karen works to lessen the confusion by calling the hour-long work 'phonics.'

The qualitative change in the class when Karen read the real dinosaur book was at once glorious and sad. It was glorious because the children engaged (the frustration behaviors pretty much vanished during the reading). The change was sad because the frequency of such engagements is diminishing. From the children's point of view, school is becoming increasingly nonsensical ("Ms L, what is a 'schoolbun?'").

When Karen sighed and said, "It's not for every child" she captured the essence of being a professional teacher. A professional is a good kidwatcher (Goodman, 19**), meaning she knows about language, language development, reading, pedagogy, and assessment. The deskilling of teachers into

technical assistants who deliver programs to all children does not merely insult teachers. It hurts children. As I watched Karen's students shred their clothing, tug at body parts, poke neighbors, and rock back and forth, I reflected upon how essential it is that we consider their actions as mirrors of their minds. Their minds are desperate for stimulation; Karen's mind is desperate to provide it. As Ken Goodman suggests, "These are desperate times."

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